

Pacific Islanders have high obesity, smoking rates

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In the first study to detail the health of Pacific Islanders living in the United States, University of Michigan researchers have found alarmingly high rates of obesity and smoking.

The preliminary findings are being presented today (Sept. 24) at a conference in Los Angeles on health disparities among [Native Hawaiians](#) and Pacific Islanders.

"Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are the second fastest growing [minority population](#) in the U.S.," said Sela Panapasa, a researcher at the U-M Institute for Social Research and principal investigator of the Pacific Islander [Health Study](#). "But they are often underrepresented in national surveys.

"This is the first scientific study to assess the health, well-being and health care use of two subgroups of this important population—[Samoans](#) and Tongans. Our hope is that this will lead to the development of evidence-based interventions and policies to improve the health of these groups, and also serve as a model for similar studies of other subgroups of this population."

For the study, the research team interviewed a random sample of 239 California households in 2011 and 2012. Half were Tongans living in the San Mateo area and half were Samoans living in the Los Angeles area. Trained Samoan and Tongan interviewers collected information on a wide range of health conditions and [health behaviors](#) among adults and

adolescents in the households.

Among the key preliminary findings:

- Smoking rates among [Pacific Islanders](#) were three to four times higher than for other Californians, and more than twice as high as in the U.S. overall. About 46 percent of Pacific Islander adults said they were current smokers, compared to 13 percent of all California adults and 20 percent of U.S. adults. Among Pacific Islander adolescents, 23 percent said they had tried [smoking cigarettes](#), compared to just 3.5 percent of California teens.
- More than half of Pacific Islander adolescents were overweight or obese based on their [body mass index](#). More than 80 percent of Pacific Islander adults had a BMI that indicated they were overweight or obese.
- Pacific Islander adults were much less likely than other adults to see a dentist (47 percent, compared to 86 percent of all Californians), and Pacific Islander women were less likely to have ever gotten a mammogram (53 percent, compared to 73 percent of Californians).
- Pacific Islander adults age 50 and older were much less likely to have ever had a colonoscopy (31 percent, compared to 78 percent of Californians). Only 24 percent of Pacific Islander women ever had a colonoscopy, compared to 79 percent of California women.
- Pacific Islander teens were much more likely than other adolescents to engage in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. For example, nearly 47 percent of Tongan teens surveyed admitted to trying alcohol, compared to 36 percent of California teens overall. And 25 percent of Pacific Islander teens had tried any drug, compared to just 14 percent of California teens overall.

"By identifying the problem areas facing specific Pacific Islander communities, we can finally begin to chart a course to develop interventions that will help to reduce these health disparities and build healthy communities," Panapasa said.

Provided by University of Michigan

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